Starting at the End: A Journey in Time

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A fundamental conclusion that I have reached from my experience as a designer, educator and theorist is that it is now impossible to constitute a viable future for humanity without design. Three key questions follow from stating this conclusion: what would actually constitute a viable future? How is humanity to be understood now? And, how is design to be understood? Brief answers to these questions will be given and a list of prerogatives suggested to the futural designer.

As others and I have argued, the concept and process of 'the Sustainment' provides a clear response to what would actually constitute a viable future. It embraces both the continuity of life itself and within it the changing nature and plurality of human life.[1] So positioned, the Sustainment should not be confused with sustainability, as it dominantly sustains the unsustainable. Rather, it denotes a post-Enlightenment intellectual project and agenda (one of or beyond the scale of the Enlightenment) to deal with 'the world' that modernity, the Enlightenment and the linked 'dark colonial underside' brought into being. The Sustainment needs to be viewed as conceptual emergence, a situated process and unending project. In essence the Sustainment is 'a work' of becoming futural. As such, places to begin can be found. It does not equate to a praxis that is 'to hand', but rather one to be created. It is not a utopian vision, for viability does not imply perfection or the fully resolved, but a qualitative continuity of life predicated upon ontological transformation of human modes of being-in-the-world (which does not simply equate to being in the Anthropocene).[2]

The question of how humanity is to be understood now is at the core of a very topical, complex and growing debate on post-humanism, the human, the post-human, and inhuman (see for example, Herbrechter, 2013). While summarising this debate is a task beyond the scope of this essay there are few qualifying remarks that need to be made.

It is clear that no consensual view will emerge out of this debate, moreover it can be expected that differences will increase (for example, between critical and techno-centric post-humanism). Likewise, the Eurocentric bias of the debate requires pointing out as it excludes/marginalises indigenous ontologies, which implies they are deemed to be of no future consequence and are fated to completely disappear by being 'modernised'. One could also note that the totalising concept and language of humanism, humanity and the human have always been, and continue to be, irredeemably problematic. Correspondingly, the existing and increasingly plural nature of 'the human' and extant and coming forms of the 'inhuman' begs much more careful analysis. Likewise, considerations — cosmological and ontological — of difference beg more attention.

As for how design is to be understood futurally, I propose design as:

 (i) An ontological characteristic of 'human being in difference', that is, prefiguration is intrinsic to all modes of 'our' being and always has been — this is a well-rehearsed position and argument that I and many others have put forward (Fry, 2012); and,

(ii) A range of restrictive professional practices that in their divisions of labour and knowledge, economic conduct and modes of territorialised professionalisation have diminished the general perception and potential of design as an ethical agent of affirmative transformation ('the good' becomes the process of the Sustainment).

The realisation of the imperative of the Sustainment and the continuity of the human in difference cannot be attained by design as it is – as a service provider to the unsustainable and the advancement of the inchoate project of the techno-thanatological inhuman. Mostly unwittingly, designing and the designed are deeply implicated in the creation of the structural unsustainability of the world of human material and immaterial fabrication (the Anthropocene). The negative biophysical and atmospheric impacts of this action are now implicated in the instigation of the planet's sixth extinction event (Kolbert, 2014). Conversely and consciously, designing and the designed have now become a major means to counter this situation. But this is only possible if design is completely transformed, for as Einstein famously remarked: "you can't solve a problem with the thinking that created it". *Ergo,* for design to be futural (that is, for [the] Sustainment), it has to be other than design thinking and practice currently is. The gargantuan challenge hereby becomes the ontological transformation of what 'we' are, and this issue returns us to the nature of the human and design transformed.

Here are six prerogatives offered up for consideration to the designer and futurist:

A Confrontation with the End

'Defuturing' names the nature of the agency of the unsustainable. In doing so, it directly manifests a process that brings the assured finitude of our species nearer. As such, it also places the loss of biodiversity that underpins the prospect of a sixth extinction event in a wider context — so what threatens is acknowledged as greater than the loss of biodiversity. As has been argued, for example by Claire Colebrook (2014), the recognition that our species is putting itself in a terminal condition is potentially the most powerful incentive for us to act otherwise. Yet a strange situation now generally obtains in Eurocentrically-directed cultures: at one extreme is the widespread propensity to ignore or deny the assumed distant danger of 'the end of the human'; at the other is an absolute faith in a giving over to technology not to save us but to make our biological substrate, our body, redundant. This is the lunatic endpoint of artificial intelligence: complete 'singularity'. Between the two is a simple failure to realise there is a danger. The challenge thus becomes the creation of a way of making present the prospect of 'the end' in a life-affirming way. The zest for life, as Heidegger made clear with his notion of 'Being-towards-death' (Heidegger, 1962, p. H234) is predicated upon the very recognition of mortality. The end of *Homo sapiens* is writ large.

End Time

Writing on Nietzsche, Bernd Magnus pointed out that 'we' are chronophobic – we fear time and live with an illusion of permanence (Magnus, 1978, pp. 190-95). Moreover, time is dominantly viewed as a measure of the duration of change and as a dimension. By implication, this means it is *the marking of the moments within that event in which change occurs*. For Aristotle time was nothing but the event of change. Physics and philosophy are in dialogue on time and its relative relation to space and change. Popular perceptions are otherwise. Time is viewed as the unit of measure, linear and as duration. Consequently, the future and finitude are misperceived. The future is viewed as a void waiting to be filled with that taken to it. Whereas a more appropriate and accurate view is of an obstacle course – one populated with 'things' that our species and natural events has thrown into it. To grasp this is to recognise the future contains things gifted from the past as it travels towards us. For example, the anthropogenically accelerated global warming is produced

by an accumulation of greenhouse gas emitted from the past (including the Industrial Revolution), added to by those arriving from the present, all sending climate change towards the planet of the future. Recognising 'we' are never anywhere but at that point of departure and arrival that is now — what we do now is critical and decisive to making the 'event now in which time occurs'. 'We' need to act in time (the medium constituted by the event) and with urgency, as what is being thrown into the future is taking the collective event of our Being away — our time is being lost.

Economy After Economy

Economic collapse is unavoidable unless there is an absolutely fundamental change of the mode of material exchange upon which the global economy rests. Currently the entropic trajectory of the economic status quo is already totally determined. The equation is straightforward: finite and stressed planetary resources + global population increasing by 50% by 2100 with +/- 80% of this population engaged in hyper-consumption. This equation sits on a bed of insecurity as the impacts of climate change increase (and with it a deep crisis of food security), as geopolitical insecurity and conflict conform to expectations and escalate. Added to this situation is the potential for new forms of inequity as the power of mega-regions displaces and fragments nations, together with the technological fracturing of any kind of unified notion of a human being, and the possibility of pandemics.

In overviewing the state of the global economy, Bernard Stiegler has argued 'we' currently live by, in and with an economy of stupidity (Stiegler, 2015). This situation epitomises the crisis of crisis in so far as the very appearances of asserted economic success are actual indicators of the crisis being unseen. Bringing together Stiegler's view of consumption as 'creative destruction', Naomi Klein's notion of 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2007) and my own thoughts on 'normality as the normative of concealment' (Fry, 2004, p.154), one can conclude that the condition of privilege to which the underprivileged aspire is but an anesthetized nightmare from which the world will wake. Even if we beings could magically establish a global economy based upon modesty and equality (a vital ambition), 'we' would still be unsustainable. Yet time would have been bought and the best case would have arrived.

Learning to Imagine (Again)

Central to the Sustainment is the recreation of the ability to imagine beyond psycho-colonisation from the constant image assault of techno-culture and its associated techno-sphere. What glitters here in the darkness (of unseeing) coming from the plasma screen of an apocalyptic commodity-filled wasteland (literally) is furnished by the creative industries — sadly a place of the wished-for *norm*ality of the many. In this world of structural unsustainability, there can be no possibility of contemplating even the idea of another way to be; let alone plural forms of (an)otherness. In the face of such a fate there is no future for the 'us' without the liberatory potential of imagination (as projective(s) coming from the few and as seductive(s) experienced by the many). Withdrawal, provocation, a confrontation with darkness, stimulation, desire, time, fiction — a space in which imagination has to be constructed: yet another challenge.

The Impossible

Central to the Sustainment is gaining an appreciation of engaging with the impossible: what has to be contemplated and acted upon is impossible. The task is beyond our abilities and reach. From all that can be seen to weigh down upon us, the plural forms of our fate are not yet sealed. We cannot continue to be without saying no. But how can it be said? The answer resides in our

unknowing. The impossible is determined by (our) knowledge. There are maybe absolute empirical conditions of limitation but they are not known beyond the limits of what we know at the moment or can expect to know in the future. Consider this: if you — by imagination — were to converse with a person in the distant past, or even a few hundred years ago, and were to tell them of some of the things people of the present can do, experience, live, you would exceed that person's imaginative reach. You would be asking them to imagine the unimaginable, the impossible.

In the crisis of now, the impossible has to be imagined. The question becomes: how and where do 'the they' (the who) commit to do this and where do they place themselves? Whatever the answer to this question, it will not be in the cultural, techno-science institutions or innovation factories of the present (which is to say, action has to go beyond description, deconstruction, commentary, the instrumental and the currently conceived economic). Moreover, the task can be expected to go into, and come to, our conditions of crisis, be intergenerational, go unrewarded, take time to progress, and even more time to be recognised. We depend on the yet unknown — and not currently imagined.

Recasting 'Us'

Without question, humanity is in an increasingly critical situation. As argued, this crisis is not fundamentally environmental or identifiable by any other external situation (although as seen, many of these situations are critical). Certainly, the discourses of sustainability, including sustainable design, are totally incapable of overcoming it. What becomes more apparent by the day is that 'we' are the critical situation in three ways: what we do as unsustainable beings, in number and action; what we are becoming by misdirection, abandoned and transformed; and by what we can define, and thereafter by intent (ontological design) remember ourselves to be. Viewed from this present, ethically we are facing a futural dilemma of having to define the human(s) we need to become in order to continue to be.

Finally, To Reconnect with the Sustainment and Design

It is obvious that progressive instrumental design practices are necessary, but are in no way sufficient to the challenges before us. Existing restrictive design knowledge, education, practices and services (including 'sustainable design'), as they support the status quo, are utterly insufficient and add to structural unsustainability.

The remaking of design cannot be divided from either the project of Sustainment (as the key intellectual force and process of futuring), or from contesting and ontologically assisting in the transformation of the human, to become more plurally human. To do this, anthropocentrism requires us to be inter-culturally engaged as a collaboration of human difference, a being-in-the-world that respectfully posits authority to the 'undeveloped' over the 'over-developed'. Such action also has to reject the telos of a post-evolutionary 'technological' designing of human being(s). In this respect it looks like difference will go beyond biology, ethnicity and the ontotheological to divide abandoned humanity and the post-human human from the technological inhuman.

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Notes

1. As such the Sustainment poses a counter discourse to techno-inhumanism and the advocates of synthetic life.
2. These remarks are a gloss on my writing on the Sustainment in works referenced below and in summary on my studio website: www.thestudioattheedgeoftheworld.com

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